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Westminster Presbyterian Church, Dayton OH
October 3, 2021: World Communion Sunday

Drawn in the Spirit's Tether: Knit Thou Our Friendship Up

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul—Acts 4:32
Friends share all things in common—Plato's *Phaedrus*, 279c

First Scripture Lesson: Matthew 14:34-36. King James Version

The Old King James Version, meaning the English translation of the Bible commissioned in 1604 by King James VI and published in 1611. We don't use it that much anymore. And for some good reasons. For one the English language has changed: We no longer speaketh after such a manner. More than that, in the past 500 years, more and better Hebrew and Greek manuscripts have been discovered. Which is not to say, however, that the King James no longer has influence. It does. Very much so.

For one, the version of the Bible we do use in worship is a revision of a revision of the King James Version—the New Revised Standard version—preserving many of the original's rhythms and cadences. And more than that, idioms, phrases, and expressions of the King James have become part of our everyday English: apple of my eye, under your wing, skin of your teeth, go the extra mile, wolf in sheep's clothing, bite the dust, sign of the times, knit together as one—I could go on.

And really sometimes the King James just says it better: "Sufficient unto this day is the evil thereof" (KJV) vs. "Today's trouble is enough for today" (NRSV). Seest thou what I meaneth? And the King James is often the language of our hymns and anthems—and beautifully so, witness the anthem the Westminster choir is about to sing.

"Touch we now thy garment's hem." Listen for those words in the anthem as the Westminster sings. It comes from the Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 14: verses 34-36, King James Version. Listen now for God's Word to us:

And when Jesus and the disciples were gone over, they came into the land of Gennesaret. And when the men of that place had knowledge of him, they sent out into all that country round about, and brought unto him all that were diseased; And besought him that they might only touch the hem of his garment: and as many as touched were made perfectly whole.

Second Scripture Lesson: Acts 4:31-35

The Book of Acts—in the New Testament, it comes right after the Gospels, complete title: *The Book of the Acts of the Apostles*. It's an account—written by Luke, author of the third Gospel—of the earliest history of the church, as the apostles begin to spread the Good News of Jesus from Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth.

Like every book of the Bible, Acts has a fascinating and at times surprising history, particularly for Protestants. Starting in the 16th-century, and for centuries thereafter, Protestants, wanting to

return to the purity of the early church, have looked to Acts as a blueprint: How should we worship? How should we live? How did the early church do it? What does it say in *Acts*?

At times, it's gotten a little crazy to the point of debating and debating whether we can have organ music in church—after all, did they have organ music in Acts? (By the way, I can settle that debate right here and now once and for all: “Ye shall hear the the organ soundeth whenever thou goest into the holy place—thus saith the Lord.”)

But really, *Acts* was never intended as a blueprint, indeed it's not even really about the acts of the Apostles it's really about the surprising acts—the amazing, unprecedented acts—of God through the person of the Holy Spirit, with the apostles, as the vehicles, going along for the ride, more surprised and more amazed than anyone. And one of those surprising, amazing, unprecedented acts was the formation of Christian communities, comprising both Jews and Gentiles, peoples previously divided.

The passage I'm about to read is an account of the formation of one of the first such communities, and as such it is a story of communion, and of course, it begins with an act of the Holy Spirit. Listen now for God's Word to us: Acts 4: 31-35 (NRSV):

When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Communion Meditation

Knox Choir—hello back there! Boy, is it good to have you back! We missed you.

And Westminster Choir—hello up there!—as I said three weeks ago—we missed you; boy, is it good to have you back!

And to have both of you here, today, singing together in worship—that's really great. And I know that during communion, you're going to sing the anthem, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” together back and forth, across the length of this sanctuary. And I know I speak for everyone when I say, we're really looking forward to that.

But I have a question for you: How are you going to do that? I mean each of you as a choir, and then the two of you, as choirs, how are you going to span that distance—sing together across the distance that divides you.

Now I know, I know: there are some obvious answers to that question, namely, John, Brent, and Jason—it's their leading you that enables you to sing together. That's true.

And I know that beneath that answer there's another one: it's the music. It's the music that brings you together, that enables you to sing together, across the divide. And I know that's true too.

But let me suggest another deeper answer: It's the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit that enables you to sing together as choirs, it's the Holy Spirit that enables you, through the music, under John, Brent, and Jason's leadership, to join us—all of us—in one heart and soul, including those watching online.

It's the Holy Spirit: Drawn in the Spirit's tether, no matter the distance that divides us, we are knit together in friendship with people the world over from Ghana to Germany, from Guatemala to Grenada, from Greece to Georgia, from Galena to Gambier. That's what happens in communion—it is world communion Sunday—we are knit together in friendship not only with one another and with people the world over, but also with God.

It's a miracle of course—it is an act of the Holy Spirit, after all—but it's a miracle we all experience all the time—everyday. You know what it's like:

You know what it's like if you've ever had a conversation with a friend, or a stranger for that matter, and you've thought to yourself: he gets it; we see things the same way; care about the same things, she understands what's important, she understands me.

You know what it's like if you've ever been part of a team, in sports, or at work or in the classroom or anywhere, and everyone is working together, doing his or her job, working towards the same goal, with shared respect and commitment, making progress.

You know what it's like if you've ever been in the crowd, rooting for your favorite team. For those few hours at least, whatever our differences may be, however far apart we may be in all other things, for those three hours we all share the Scarlet and Gray spirit, or Flyers Red and Blue spirit, or the Wright State Green and gold spirit, or the maize and bl . . . Well, let's just leave it there, shall we? (The Spirit blows where she will, I suppose.)

You know what it's like if you've ever thought about someone—or better yet, said to someone, “You know I completely misjudged you; I thought you were just another - - - - - (you fill in that blank), but now I see that there's a lot more to you, that we have a lot in common, that we can be friends.”

You know what it's like when you felt for however long a time—and for however long a time it is it always feel like a very long time—if you've ever felt that nobody saw things the way you did, that nobody really saw you; that nobody was like you or liked you; that no one cared about the things you cared about or cared about you at all; until one day, in one surprising moment, you realized that someone did, and that changed everything, that made all the difference in the world.

You know what it's like. Now raise that to the nth degree, because that's what happens in communion between us and God.

Just to touch the hem of his garment, that was enough—as the people followed Jesus that was enough to heal them, to make them whole. And in truth, Jesus will do more than that, much more. To borrow the language of the Old King James: Jesus not only suffers them to touch the

hem of his garment, but he suffers on a cross—for them, for us, for all people—so that all of us might be knit together in friendship with God:

When I survey the wondrous cross, Love so amazing, so divine . . .

And perhaps at this point, especially in these times, it's important to look back to the Book of Acts, not for a blueprint, but for reassurance, inspiration, and hope.

“Globalization,”—the increasing worldwide interaction and integration of economic, cultural, political, religious, and social systems—you won't find that word in the Old King James Version. In fact, it seems to have been coined only in the 1930's, coming into widespread use about thirty years ago, as the pace of globalization—after all, there was globalization going on back in the 1600's even if they didn't have the word for it—seemed to pick up dramatically, even exponentially.

But the thing of it is, that increased pace of globalization doesn't seem to have necessarily lessened our differences or overcome our divides. In fact, it seems in many ways to have heightened them and sharpened them. Even worse, globalization seems to have exacerbated our differences with our neighbors, those we already live in close proximity with, our fellow citizens. That we think of our country in terms of red and blue states, and that we now do so without even thinking about it, is in part due to our varying reactions to, and attitudes towards, globalization.

But the book of Acts reminds us that we're not the main actors here. The main actor is God, working through the person of the Holy Spirit doing surprising amazing, unprecedented acts bringing together peoples previously divided—with us as the vehicles, like the first Apostles, going along for the ride more surprised and more amazed than anyone.

And if it that doesn't seem to be the case in our world today—if the divisiveness seems to be winning—that's precisely why we need to come to the table to partake of the Lord's Supper so that we will have the eyes to see the Holy Spirit at work in our world and in us, making us perfectly whole.

And the ears to hear—listen to our two choirs as they sing together, back and forth, across the distance and divide of this sanctuary. They will draw us in the Spirit's tether, knitting us together in friendship with one another, with the peoples of the world, and with God.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.